

Unit 1: Foundations of American Democracy

Unit 1 covers where the American system came from and how it was built. It looks at the ideals stated in the Declaration of Independence, the arguments between Federalists and Anti-Federalists, and the Constitution's design for divided and shared power. CED topics 1.1 through 1.9.

AP U.S. Government

Foundations of American Democracy

15-22% of the exam

About 12 minutes to read

How to use this guide

As you read this guide the first time, think about how a set of ideals about liberty became a working system of government. Unit 1 moves from the Declaration of Independence, through the failure of the Articles of Confederation, through the fight over ratification, and then to a Constitution that divides power so no single holder controls it all. The sections below follow that story in CED order.

After the first read, study from the trap boxes and the tables. The trap boxes hold the misconceptions that cost the most points, and the comparison tables (power types, grant types, the two required cases) are built for the kind of sorting the multiple-choice section demands. Finish with the practice questions, the recall check, and the 20-minute plan.

What this unit is worth. Unit 1 is 15-22% of the AP exam. You will also see the required documents and cases from this unit again later in the course. Federalist No. 10, Brutus No. 1, Federalist No. 51, McCulloch v. Maryland, and United States v. Lopez come up as evidence in questions about institutions in Unit 2 and about rights in Unit 3.

1.1 Ideals of Democracy

The American founding starts with a claim about where power comes from. The **Declaration of Independence** argues that people hold **natural rights**, rights they possess by nature rather than as a gift from government, and that governments exist to protect those rights. The **social contract** describes the bargain underneath that idea. People accept limits on some of their freedom in exchange for social order and protection. When a government breaks its side of the bargain, the contract is broken and the government's claim to obedience goes with it. That is the Declaration's argument for independence, and it is why the document is a required foundational text.

The **U.S. Constitution** takes the Declaration's ideals and builds a system of government around them. **Popular sovereignty** means legitimate power flows from the consent of the people. **Limited government** means that power is restricted by law and cannot become absolute. **Republicanism**

means the people govern through elected representatives rather than deciding every question themselves. **Separation of powers** divides national authority among legislative, executive, and judicial branches. **Checks and balances** give each branch tools to resist the others. **Federalism** divides and shares power between the national government and the states. Each of these ideas is meant to address a concern about power becoming concentrated, unchecked, or too distant from the people.

The **Gettysburg Address** is a required foundational document that reaffirms equality and popular sovereignty as foundations of American democracy. Delivered by President Abraham Lincoln in 1863 during the Civil War, it frames the war as a test of whether a nation "conceived in Liberty, and dedicated to the proposition that all men are created equal" can long endure. The address ties the Declaration's promise of equality to the Constitution's project of self-government, presenting popular sovereignty as the mechanism by which equality is preserved.

Trap. natural rights come before government, not from it. The Declaration treats rights as the standard governments are judged against, and the Bill of Rights as their protection, not their source. If a question asks what makes a law unjust in the founders' framework, the answer is that it violates rights government never granted and may not take.

1.2 Types of Democracy

Three models describe how American democracy actually works, and the exam wants you to tell them apart. **Participatory democracy** emphasizes broad citizen involvement in politics and civil society. **Pluralist democracy** emphasizes competition among organized groups, each pushing its interests and checking the others. **Elite democracy** emphasizes that a relatively small number of people hold outsized influence while most citizens participate little. These models describe how power works, and founding-era writers disagreed about which description fit best.

MODEL	WHO HOLDS POWER	FOUNDING-ERA VOICE
Participatory	Citizens, broadly involved	Anti-Federalist preference for small, close republics
Pluralist	Competing organized groups	Madison in Federalist No. 10: many factions check each other
Elite	A small, influential few	The fear both sides shared about concentrated power

The size-of-the-republic argument sits at the center of this topic. In **Federalist No. 10**, Madison argues that a large republic with many competing interests is the cure for **faction**, a group united by a passion or interest that can threaten the rights of others. If factions are spread across a big, diverse country, no single one can easily dominate. In **Brutus No. 1**, the Anti-Federalist author answers that a large, powerful national republic will threaten liberty and meaningful representation, because representatives become too distant to stay accountable. Madison argued that a larger republic would help control faction, while Brutus argued that a smaller republic would keep representatives closer to the people. Later debates about federal power return to this same disagreement about size and distance.

Trap. pluralist and participatory are not synonyms. Participatory democracy is about citizens taking part; pluralist democracy is about organized groups competing. A question describing interest groups checking each other is describing pluralism, even if ordinary voters barely appear in the story.

1.3 Government Power and Individual Rights

The ratification fight was a fight about power and trust. **Federalists** supported ratifying the Constitution and favored a stronger national government. **Anti-Federalists** opposed ratification, favored keeping power in the states, and feared the new government would threaten individual liberty. The two sides were not arguing about whether government should exist. They were arguing about which level of government could be trusted with how much power.

Both sides worried about faction. Madison's proposed solution was the **large republic**. In a big, diverse nation, competing factions cancel each other out and no majority faction can easily form to oppress a minority. The Anti-Federalist answer was the **small republic**. They wanted government kept close to the people so representatives would stay directly accountable. The fight ended with a bargain. Because Anti-Federalists pressed for it, the **Bill of Rights**, the first ten amendments, became part of the settlement that secured ratification. Protections for individual liberty were written into the Constitution because the opponents of the Constitution demanded them.

Trap. the Anti-Federalists lost the ratification vote but won the Bill of Rights. The exam often tests whether you know that the Bill of Rights was added because of Anti-Federalist pressure, not because the Federalists proposed it. The Federalists argued a bill of rights was unnecessary, and the Anti-Federalists made it a condition of their support.

1.4 Challenges of the Articles of Confederation

The **Articles of Confederation** created a confederation, an arrangement in which the member states kept most real political authority and the national government handled little. The design reflected what the founders wanted right after independence. They kept most power with the states and gave the national government few tools to act on its own. As a result, Congress could ask the states for help but often could not require them to comply.

- No national executive branch to enforce laws or decisions.
- No national court system to settle disputes between states or interpret national law.
- No power to tax. Congress could request money from the states but had no mechanism to make them pay.
- No power to regulate interstate commerce, so states taxed each other's goods and trade wars broke out.
- No exclusive control over currency, which fed economic disorder.

Shays' Rebellion in 1786 and 1787 showed the problem in practice. Farmers in Massachusetts, burdened by debt and taxes, rose up, and the national government had no centralized military capacity to respond. The uprising convinced leaders such as Washington and Madison that revising the Articles

would not be enough. Delegates met at the Constitutional Convention in 1787 to revise them, but they ended up writing a new Constitution.

Trap. Shays' Rebellion proved the national government was too weak, not too strong. Students sometimes link rebellion with tyranny and pick the wrong lesson. In this case, disorder worried the founders more than oppression, and that concern pushed them to build a stronger national government.

1.5 Ratification of the U.S. Constitution

The Constitutional Convention was a series of bargains, and the exam tests the terms of each one. The **Great (Connecticut) Compromise** settled representation by creating a bicameral Congress with the House apportioned by population and the Senate giving each state equal representation. The **Electoral College** settled presidential selection by having electors appointed by the states formally choose the president. The **Three-Fifths Compromise** counted three-fifths of the enslaved population for both representation and direct taxation. The **slave importation compromise** barred Congress from banning the importation of enslaved persons before 1808. Each compromise helped secure support that ratification needed. The compromises over slavery protected the institution and had serious moral consequences.

BARGAIN	CONFLICT IT RESOLVED	WHAT EACH SIDE GOT
Great (Connecticut) Compromise	Large states vs small states over representation	Population-based House; equal-state Senate
Electoral College	Direct popular vote vs congressional selection of the president	State-appointed electors choose; small states keep weight
Three-Fifths Compromise	Whether enslaved people counted toward representation	South gained House seats; North gained tax revenue
Importation compromise	Whether the trade in enslaved persons could be banned	Trade protected until 1808

Ratification itself was the final bargain. Nine states had to approve, and Anti-Federalist opposition was strong enough that Federalists promised a bill of rights to win over holdouts. The **Bill of Rights** followed, and **Article V** set out how amendments would be made from that point on. Proposal requires a supermajority, either two-thirds of Congress or a convention called by two-thirds of the states, and ratification requires three-fourths of the states. The process is difficult on purpose. If a simple majority could change the Constitution at any time, it would function more like an ordinary law than a higher law.

Trap. the Electoral College was not designed as a national popular vote. It is a separate mechanism in which state-appointed electors choose the president. A candidate can win the national popular vote and lose the election, and that outcome can happen under the system as it was designed.

1.6 Principles of American Government

Separation of powers assigns the legislative, executive, and judicial jobs to different branches so no single branch holds all of them. **Checks and balances** give each branch ways to restrain the others. The president can veto laws, Congress can override vetoes and control funding, the Senate confirms appointments, and courts review whether government action is constitutional. In **Federalist No. 51**, Madison argues that this structure helps control abuses of power without relying on the virtue of officeholders. He argued that officials would protect their own branch's power, and that competition between branches would help limit abuse.

The House of Representatives formally charges a federal official with misconduct or abuse of power, and that charge is called impeachment. The Senate then holds a trial and may convict the official and **remove the official from office**. Because charging and removal are handled by different chambers, no single body can do both on its own. Dividing institutions this way also creates **multiple access points** where citizens and groups can try to influence policy.

Trap. impeachment is not removal. The House impeaches by charging; only the Senate can convict and remove. An official can be impeached and stay in office, and the exam regularly offers 'the president was removed' as the wrong answer to a question about a House impeachment vote.

1.7 Relationship between the States and National Government

Federalism is about deciding which level of government handles which responsibilities. The Constitution gives the national government different kinds of power. **Enumerated powers** are the ones specifically listed in the Constitution, mostly in Article I, Section 8. **Implied powers** are inferred from the enumerated ones through the **Necessary and Proper Clause**, which lets Congress make laws needed to carry out its listed powers. **Reserved powers** belong to the states under the **Tenth Amendment**. Powers that the Constitution does not delegate to the national government stay with the states or the people. **Concurrent powers**, like taxing, policing, and building roads, are shared by both levels. **Exclusive powers** belong to only one level.

POWER TYPE	MEANING	EXAMPLE
Enumerated	Listed in the Constitution	Congress declares war, regulates interstate commerce
Implied	Inferred via the Necessary and Proper Clause	Chartering a national bank
Reserved (Tenth Amendment)	Not delegated; kept by states or people	Running public schools, issuing licenses
Concurrent	Shared by national and state governments	Taxing, law enforcement, building roads
Exclusive	Held by one level only	Coining money (national)

The national government often influences state policy through money. **Categorical grants** fund specific purposes with detailed federal rules attached, and they are the most commonly used form of federal aid. **Block grants** fund broad purposes with relatively few restrictions. **Revenue sharing** gives states money with almost no restrictions, and it is the least used form. **Mandates** are requirements imposed on states. When no federal money comes with them, they are unfunded mandates, and states often object to them for that reason. When federal money comes with specific rules, the national government keeps more control over how it is used.

Trap. the Necessary and Proper Clause is not a blank check. It authorizes laws that carry out enumerated powers, which is exactly what the Anti-Federalists feared it would exceed and exactly what *McCulloch v. Maryland* had to decide. Questions often test whether you understand both points. The clause expands congressional power, but it still has limits.

The power types and grant types in this section are worth drilling as flashcards, because the exam asks you to sort them quickly. In Rycal, the Unit 1 deck under AP U.S. Government has cards built around the same mix-ups named in the trap box above.

1.8 Constitutional Interpretations of Federalism

McCulloch v. Maryland (1819) is an important case for understanding the modern national government. Congress had chartered a national bank; Maryland taxed it. The Court held that Congress had the **implied power** to create the bank through the Necessary and Proper Clause, and that Maryland could not tax it because of the **Supremacy Clause**. Valid federal law takes precedence over conflicting state law. The reasoning has two steps that are worth keeping separate. First, the bank was a way for Congress to carry out its constitutional responsibilities. Second, a state cannot use its taxing power to destroy a federal instrument. Marshall's point was that the power to tax could be used to destroy, and the Supremacy Clause does not allow a state to override valid federal law in that way.

The **Commerce Clause** became another major source of national power, allowing Congress to regulate interstate commerce as the national economy grew. **United States v. Lopez** (1995) set a limit on that power. Congress had made gun possession in a school zone a federal crime, and the Court held that this stretched the Commerce Clause too far. It was the first modern case to say the commerce power has boundaries. The **Fourteenth Amendment** also matters here. Its **Due Process** and **Equal Protection Clauses** give the national government a basis for protecting individuals against state action, which is the constitutional foundation for much of Unit 3.

CASE	QUESTION	HOLDING	EFFECT ON FEDERAL POWER
<i>McCulloch v. Maryland</i> (1819)	Can Congress charter a bank? Can a state tax it?	Yes to the bank via implied powers; no to the tax via supremacy	Expanded
<i>United States v. Lopez</i> (1995)	Can Congress criminalize guns near schools under the Commerce Clause?	No; the link to interstate commerce was too thin	Limited

Two more points help explain how federalism works in practice. In **Federalist No. 39**, Madison describes the Constitution as a blend of national and federal features rather than a concentration of all authority at one level. **Judicial interpretation** also affects where the boundary falls. How courts read the Commerce, Necessary and Proper, and Supremacy Clauses in each era affects how much authority the national government and the states have.

Trap. Lopez did not shrink Congress back to 1789. It marked one outer limit of the Commerce Clause while leaving the vast body of commerce regulation intact. The exam tests whether you can state the limit clearly. In Lopez, Congress exceeded its power in that particular instance. It would be wrong to read Lopez as a general rollback of Congress's commerce power.

1.9 Federalism in Action

Federalism affects how policy gets made, not just how power is divided on paper. Because authority is split between levels of government, groups have **multiple access points**. A group that does not succeed in Congress can try a state legislature, a governor, or a state court, and a group blocked in one state can try another. States can engage in **policy experimentation** by trying different approaches to similar problems, and successful ideas can spread to other states. Because states hold real authority in many policy areas, **state policy variation** means the same policy can look different from one state to another.

The same split can also create friction. **Concurrent powers** mean the national government and the states operate in the same policy areas, so action at one level can limit choices at the other. Any **stakeholder**, meaning a person, group, or government with an interest in the outcome, may need to work at both the national and state levels because no single level decides everything.

Trap. federalism does not let a state override valid federal law. The Supremacy Clause settles direct conflicts in favor of the national government. State experimentation happens within the limits set by federal law.

Your 20-minute plan for this unit

- Minutes 0-5. Flashcards: run the Unit 1 deck on Rycal and rate every card honestly. Star anything on the power types, the grant types, or the Convention compromises; those topics often appear as sorting questions on the exam.
- Minutes 5-12. Brain Dump: write everything you remember about why the Articles of Confederation failed and what the Constitution put in their place. Then compare against the guide and fill the gaps in a different color.
- Minutes 12-18. AP-style questions: do a set of Unit 1 questions on Rycal, focusing on the two required cases and on Federalist No. 10 versus Brutus No. 1.
- Minutes 18-20. FRQ drills: outline one Concept Application response on Rycal using *McCulloch v. Maryland* as your evidence. Write one paragraph that uses the case as evidence and links it clearly to the concept.

Confusions That Cost Points

Unit 1 often comes down to sorting ideas correctly, and the table below covers the distinctions the exam tests most often.

THE MIX-UP	THE FIX
Federalists vs Anti-Federalists	Federalists backed the Constitution and a stronger national government. Anti-Federalists opposed ratification, wanted power kept in the states, and demanded the Bill of Rights.
Impeachment vs removal	The House impeaches by charging; the Senate tries the case and can convict and remove. Impeachment alone removes no one.
Enumerated vs implied vs reserved powers	Enumerated are listed in the Constitution; implied are inferred through the Necessary and Proper Clause; reserved stay with the states under the Tenth Amendment.
Categorical vs block vs revenue-sharing grants	Categorical: specific purpose, most common. Block: broad purpose, fewer strings. Revenue sharing: almost no strings, least used.
McCulloch vs Lopez	McCulloch expanded federal power through implied powers and supremacy. Lopez limited it by drawing an outer line around the Commerce Clause.
Popular sovereignty vs direct democracy	The U.S. practices republicanism: the people rule through elected representatives, not by voting on every law.
The lesson of Shays' Rebellion	It exposed the Articles' weakness and pushed leaders toward a stronger national government, not toward limiting one.
The Necessary and Proper Clause	It authorizes laws that carry out enumerated powers. It expands congressional power, but it is not unlimited, which is why McCulloch had to be decided.

Practice Questions

Original questions written for this guide in the style of the AP exam. Answers and explanations follow. Do not peek.

1. In *McCulloch v. Maryland* (1819), the Supreme Court upheld Congress's power to charter a national bank and struck down Maryland's tax on it. The Court's reasoning rested on which pair of constitutional principles?

- A. The Commerce Clause and the Tenth Amendment
- B. The General Welfare Clause and the Full Faith and Credit Clause
- C. Implied powers through the Necessary and Proper Clause and the Supremacy Clause
- D. Popular sovereignty and the Guarantee Clause

2. Congress offers states funding that may be spent on nearly any community development purpose, with very few federal restrictions on its use. Which type of federal grant is this?

- A. A block grant
- B. A categorical grant
- C. A revenue-sharing grant
- D. A federal mandate

- 3.** James Madison argues in Federalist No. 10 that a large republic controls the dangers of faction better than a small one can. What is his central reasoning?
- A. A large republic can ban factions outright through national law.
 - B. A large republic contains so many competing interests that no single faction can easily form a majority to oppress others.
 - C. A large republic guarantees that representatives share the exact views of their constituents.
 - D. A large republic eliminates the need for separation of powers.
- 4.** A president vetoes a bill passed by Congress. Congress then votes again and passes the bill with a two-thirds majority in each chamber, overriding the veto. What does this sequence best illustrate?
- A. Judicial review
 - B. Federalism
 - C. Checks and balances
 - D. Popular sovereignty

Answer Key

1. C. C is correct because the Court found the bank to be an implied power for carrying out enumerated powers, and held that Maryland could not tax a federal instrument because valid federal law is supreme over conflicting state law. A is incorrect because the Tenth Amendment reserves undelegated powers to the states, which points away from the holding in this case. B names real clauses, but neither the General Welfare Clause nor the Full Faith and Credit Clause drove the decision. D names real principles, but neither was the legal basis of the ruling.

2. A. A is correct because block grants fund broad purposes with relatively few restrictions. B is incorrect because categorical grants are the most common form, but they are restricted to specific purposes with detailed federal rules, which is the opposite of this scenario. C is tempting because revenue sharing also carries few restrictions, but it is a distinct and least-used form, not the broad-purpose grant described. D is not a grant. A mandate is a requirement imposed on states, not money sent to them.

3. B. B is correct because Madison's argument is that extending the sphere of the republic multiplies competing interests, making it harder for any one faction to form an oppressive majority. A is incorrect because Madison argues the causes of faction cannot be removed, only their effects controlled. C describes a delegate view of representation, not Madison's argument about filtering interests through a large republic. D is incorrect because separation of powers is the subject of Federalist No. 51, and a large republic does not remove the need for it.

4. C. C is correct because the veto and the override are each branch checking the other, the core of checks and balances. A is incorrect because no court is involved. B is incorrect because the sequence involves only national branches, not the state-national division. D is incorrect because popular sovereignty concerns the source of government's authority, not how branches limit each other.

If you missed any question, make a flashcard out of the distinction you missed and add it to the Unit 1 deck on Rycal. Drill it again over the next few days instead of only rereading the answer once.

One-Page Recall Check

Say each answer out loud or write it down. If you look first, you are more likely to recognize the material on the page than to recall it on your own.

1. Name the four bargains of the Constitutional Convention and state what conflict each one resolved.
2. Explain Madison's argument in Federalist No. 10 for why a large republic controls the effects of faction.
3. List four weaknesses of the Articles of Confederation and name the event that exposed them.
4. Distinguish categorical grants, block grants, and revenue sharing by purpose, restrictions, and frequency of use.
5. How do the holdings in *McCulloch v. Maryland* and *United States v. Lopez* point in opposite directions on federal power?
6. Walk through the Article V amendment process and explain why its supermajority requirements make amendment difficult.

Anything you could not say out loud goes into the deck. Add a flashcard for it in Rycal and work it spaced over several days, then try this list again without looking.

Key terms for this unit

Natural rights, Social contract, Popular sovereignty, Limited government, Separation of powers, Checks and balances, Federalism, Republicanism, Declaration of Independence, Gettysburg Address, U.S. Constitution, Participatory democracy, Pluralist democracy, Elite democracy, Representative democracy, Federalist No. 10, Brutus No. 1, Political participation, Civil society, Federalists, Anti-Federalists, Faction, Large republic, Small republic, Ratification, Bill of Rights, Articles of Confederation, Shays' Rebellion, Executive branch, National court system, Interstate commerce, Taxation under the Articles, Coin money, Confederation, Great Compromise, Bicameral legislature, Electoral College, Three-Fifths Compromise, Slave importation compromise, Article V, Constitutional amendment, Ratification compromise, Federalism debate, Federalist No. 51, Multiple access points, Impeachment, Removal from office, Legislative branch, Judicial branch, Exclusive powers, Enumerated powers, Implied powers, Necessary and Proper Clause, Reserved powers, Tenth Amendment, Concurrent powers, Federalist No. 39, Revenue sharing, Block grants, Categorical grants, Mandates, Fourteenth Amendment, Due Process Clause, Equal Protection Clause, Commerce Clause, Supremacy Clause, *McCulloch v. Maryland*, *United States v. Lopez*, Judicial interpretation, Federalism in policymaking, Policy experimentation, Stakeholder, State policy variation.

Questions students ask about Unit 1

How much of the exam is Unit 1?

Unit 1 is 15-22% of the AP exam. It also comes up in the rest of the test. The founding documents and the two required cases show up as evidence in later units' questions and FRQs.

Do I have to memorize the Federalist Papers?

No. You should know the arguments rather than memorize the text. Federalist No. 10 argues that a large republic controls faction. Brutus No. 1 argues that a large republic threatens liberty and representation. Federalist No. 51 explains how separation of powers and checks and balances control

abuses when ambition in one branch counters ambition in another. Federalist No. 39 describes the Constitution as a blend of national and federal features.

Which Supreme Court cases are required in Unit 1?

There are two. *McCulloch v. Maryland* (1819) deals with implied powers and the Supremacy Clause, and *United States v. Lopez* (1995) deals with the outer limit of the Commerce Clause. Know the facts, the holdings, and which direction each one moves federal power.

What is the hardest distinction in this unit?

The power types and the grant types are often the hardest distinctions because the exam tests them as sorting questions. Practice telling enumerated, implied, reserved, and concurrent powers apart, then do the same for categorical grants, block grants, and revenue sharing.

How does Unit 1 connect to the free-response section?

Unit 1 connects to the free-response section in a practical way. Concept Application questions ask you to apply founding principles to new scenarios, and the Argument Essay rewards evidence drawn from required documents and cases. If you understand *McCulloch* or Federalist No. 10 well, you can use either one as evidence in more than one FRQ.

Where to go next

Turn every missed item above into flashcards and drill them spaced out over several days rather than in one sitting. That applies to the practice questions, the recall check, and any trap you recognized in yourself while reading.

In Rycal, open the Unit 1 deck under AP U.S. Government. The deck covers the terms in this guide, and the practice questions there go after the same traps named in these pages, so the work you did here carries straight over. If a topic still feels shaky, start your next session with a Brain Dump on it, write down what you remember, and check it against the section of this guide that covers it.

About this guide. Written for Rycal and aligned to the College Board AP U.S. Government and Politics course framework, Unit 1. All questions and explanations are original Rycal writing. Rycal is independent and is not affiliated with or endorsed by the College Board.